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ABSTRACT

During qualitative empirical research on the biographical learning processes of women due to transitions in their work situation, this theoretical, methodological theme arose that was intriguing to the researcher: the relationship between the learning processes of the women interviewed and of the researcher on one hand and the stories that were told because of the research by the women and researcher on the other. The hypothesis was that the interconnection of narrative and learning of the research subjects and researcher is an inherent feature of narrative biographical research. Consequently, it had to be acknowledged as such to account for the quality of the research results and process. The relationship between the telling of a life story and the learning process of the women could be seen as the life story as data revealing biographical strategies; the life story as a process of biographical work and biographical learning; and life stories as revelation and transformation. The researcher says he underwent a learning process during the research for which telling the research story on various occasions was crucial. By revealing and transforming insights, the research story was crucial for the research process and result. He believes his learning process was many-sided. Methodologically, he learned about the relationship among learning, narrating, and research and about his position as a researcher in narrative biographical research. Theoretically, he learned a (narrative) way to construct a grounded framework and account for it as scientific knowledge. (Contains 33 references.) (YLB)

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European perspectives on Life History research: theory and practice of biographical narratives

Paper

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V. Stroobants

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Title

LEARNING STORIES IN NARRATIVE BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH

Key argument[1]

This paper discusses the relation between (narrating) a story and (experiencing) a learning process - on the part of the research subjects as well as on the part of the researcher - as an inherent feature of narrative biographical research.
The starting point is my PhD research on the biographical learning processes of women. During this research I struggled with the nature of the life stories the women shared with me. Are their stories merely empirical data revealing a lifelong learning process or must they be considered as (learning) processes in itself, transforming the life being told? This struggle traces back to the ambivalences I experienced between the theoretical presuppositions underlying the research on the one hand and the methodological directives I actually followed on the other hand, situated against a broad field of diverse approaches, traditions and practices of (narrative biographical) research.
A position is taken up concerning the consequences of radically living up to the starting points of narrative biographical research for the position of the researcher in the research process, for the research results and for the research report. I argue that - in order to do right to the particularity, the meaning making and the agency of the research subjects and thus to the revealing character and transforming power of their life story – the researcher has to take narrative biographical research seriously. Therefore it is necessary to reflect on and communicate about the research process itself in terms of a narrative and a learning process.

[1] I would like to thank my former supervisor Danny Wildemeersch and my colleague Frank Cockx for their useful remarks and suggestions while preparing this paper.

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Introduction

Last year in July I finished my PhD research and obtained my doctor's degree. I conducted a qualitative empirical research on the biographical learning processes of women due to transitions in their work situation. In this paper I reflect upon a theoretical, methodological theme that came to intrigue me during the research, namely the relation between the learning processes of the women I interviewed and of myself as a researcher on the one hand and the stories that were told because of the research, both by the women and by myself, on the other hand. It is my opinion that the interconnection of narrative and learning of the research subjects as well as of the researcher is an inherent feature of narrative biographical research. Consequently it has to be acknowledged as such to account for the quality of the research results and of the research process.
I start with a brief presentation of my PhD research. Next I focus on the relation between the telling of the life story and the learning process of the women I interviewed. I continue with a reflection on the learning process of the researcher and on the role of telling and writing the narrative of the research in relation to the scientific value of biographical narrative research. To conclude I explore the similarities and differences between the narrative and the learning of the research subjects and of the researcher.

A biographical research on women's work, learning and living

Research question and societal background

Today far reaching processes of individualisation and fast evolutions on the labour market confront women as well as various adult education initiatives with a complex and changing relation between emancipation, work and education. For women, standardised pathways of life and work do not make real sense any longer. Consequently, women have to make their own choices in life and work. They are challenged to give their own meaning to acquired rights in a desirable and responsible manner and to create and appropriate new life styles to give shape to their choices. My PhD research is situated against this backdrop (Stroobants, 2001).
My research interest was twofold. First, I wanted to know how women learn to cope with the ever changing and ambivalent meaning and reality of work in their lives and in current society. How do they learn to live their own life, meanwhile managing uncertainties and crises concerning work? Next, I explored what role different adult education organisations play in (stimulating and supporting) the learning processes of these women. However interesting, this second theme does not fall within the scope of this paper.

Research methodology and justification

In order to gain more insight into my research interests, I conducted a narrative biographical research. I interviewed eight women and asked them to tell me their life histories, with a special focus on work. All the women involved anticipated or (had) experienced a change in their work situation and (had) participated in several kinds of adult education initiatives in order to better cope with this transition in their lives.
Due to societal individualisation processes and the sharpened focus on the individual and her biography, biographical research, especially in the fields of education and gender studies, is fashionable and attractive today. Next to this influence, there lies a (action) theoretical assumption at the basis of my choice for a narrative biographical research methodology. The presupposition is that individuals are

competent agents who actively give meaning to their life and to their social environment and who have the potential competences to act accordingly[2].

I chose for biographical research because the notion of 'biography' reflects this complex interwoven relation between individual and society, or between subject and structure. A biography consists of two intermingled components (Alheit, 1995). On the one hand there is the socio-cultural and structural dimension of biography, which refers to the more or less prescribed life course patterns and established meaning perspectives that direct people's life histories. On the other hand each biography contains a certain amount of free action space, which points out the individual potentiality to actually bring to life the given scripts in a particular way. Within the provided structures of institutional life patterns and meaning models, alternative possibilities are open. These can be realised by individuals, in their turn influencing the structural dimension of biography. Individuals are influenced by the structural context they move in, but are not determined by it. As agents they can actively contribute to their structured and structuring environment. "The notion of biography does not reproduce the split between individual and society, but rather structures both spheres. In its manifestations of life-history, life story and institutional biographical patterns, biography bridges the theoretically constructed gap between inner and outer sphere. Thus, biography has a double meaning. It refers to social structure by providing agents with various socially patterned life courses to be transferred in the course of their life-histories. It also refers to the story which the individual is able to – and indeed – must tell" (Fischer-Rosenthal, 1995, p.259).
Biographical research presents itself as a way to gain insight in this complex relation between individuals' particular experiences, meanings and action strategies and their social and societal context (see for instance Alheit, 1997; Antikainen, 1998; Dominicé, 2000; Krüger, 1993; West, 2001). Moreover it holds the promise to do justice to the variety and multiplicity of concrete life practices, in contrast with the normative and unifying model of the institutionalised life course (Kochuyt, 1993).
Another reason for using a biographical research method was that I wanted to understand the learning processes of the women from a diachronic process perspective and from their own 'self-understanding'. Biographical research does not only have a dynamic starting point, taking into account past, present and future, it also is mainly narrative, exploring people's life stories (Kelchtermans, 1999).

I chose for narrative research because life stories are the most rich and meaningful data if one is interested in the meaningful thinking and acting of individuals. Narratives are the basic structure of human meaning giving (Polkinghorne, 1995). "Narrative is a central structure in human meaning making; thus, the life course and individual identity are experienced as a story" (Rossiter, 1999, p. 59). By telling their life story individuals make sense of and give meaning to life experiences. In their story they try to create a certain coherence and continuity to face the given complexity and ambivalence of life. However, narrative data are not merely an expression of the meaning giving processes and of the self presentation of individuals, they are also constitutive for it (Fischer-Rosenthal, 1995; Smeyers, 1999; Verhesschen, 1999).

Research results

The life stories of the women I interviewed show that individualised biographies are more than a logical consequence or an inevitable reaction to processes of increasing individualisation. Their stories do not only contribute to permanent adaptation to changing societal and economic trends, but testify to individual and social agency.
Via an iterative, abductive process of analysis, I developed a grounded interpretative framework to better understand the learning processes of the women in relation to work. The stories I gathered teach me that the meaning and place of work in women's lives is not steady, but always moving. Moreover throughout

[2] An agent simultaneously is shaped by and is actively shaping the surrounding social context. This position represents a middle road between structural determinism and individual freedom of choice and action and relates to attempts by several authors to escape one-sided positions on either side of this continuum.

the research process I began to understand that the real 'job' the women perform, is the (re)construction of their self in relation to society[3]. During their life they are looking for ways to develop their self as a person and to meaningfully contribute to society as a social agent. In work they see one way to do so. Work represents a possible and desirable way for the women to structure and make sense of their life and to widen their social action space. However, finding a job attuned to their own capacities and personal and social aspirations on the one hand and to the demands and structures of the labour market on the other hand, is not taken for granted. In order to meaningfully connect their self with work and to maintain and develop oneself as an agent, the women develop and use various biographical strategies. They are permanently balancing their own needs, desires, wishes, ambitions, plans on the one hand and societal expectations and requirements of the labour market on the other hand. Meanwhile they have to take into account the opportunities and limitations in society and on the labour market and their own feelings of agency and competency to deal with these contextual characteristics. This biographical work women do, is interpreted as a biographical learning process of looking for and bringing about meaningful connections between individual life and social reality[4]. Biographical reflexivity and biographical agency play a crucial role in this learning process.
In this paper I only very briefly touch upon these theoretical insights. The focus is not so much on the product as on the process of the research.

The life story and the learning process of the women

The life story as data revealing biographical strategies

In the first instance I saw the stories the women told me as a way of presenting their past, as a revelation or actualisation of the learning processes they had already gone through (Verhesschen, 2001)[5]. In this respect the stories reveal a learning process that unfolds itself during the whole biography and finds a preliminary end in the story that is told during the interview.

The stories I heard, taught me that the women develop different biographical strategies to meaningfully connect their self development to social participation. I define biographical strategies as ways to meaningfully connect self and work and to maintain and develop oneself as an agent in a context that offers opportunities as well as sets limitations. These strategies come about and evolve during life and are visible trough the choices women make in their life course and in the way they account for these choices in their life stories. I interpreted the way in which the women created, used, changed... strategies to manage their work and life as their learning process. The main strategies I distinguished are adaptation, growth, distinction and resistance. I shortly explain them referring to the story of one of the women.

Anita[6] is a young married woman without children, looking for 'the right job' after some frustrating work experiences. She wants to do a training for a man's job which she is not allowed to finish, because there is

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[3] I found support for this interpretation in the work of Tennant (2000) on the role of narratives in self work, of Rossiter (1999) on the narrative understanding of adult development, and of Fenwick (1998) on establishing and reinventing self in work.

[4] In Stroobants, Jans & Wildemeersch (2001) the theoretical framework on biographical and transitional learning is further elaborated.

[5] I would like to thank my colleague Piet Verhesschen for the fruitful discussions we had the past few months concerning both our researches. They were revealing as well as transforming for me.

[6] Anita is one of the women I interviewed. Anita is not her real name. Anita's story is very central in my doctoral dissertation. Not only because it was very helpful for my analysis and because it illustrates my theoretical framework well. Anita is also a good narrator. Her story is appealing. This does not mean however that I didn't take into account the stories that were more difficult to understand, or the women who were less reflexive and less fluent with words. I tried to do justice to all the women and to their stories.

no way to get her to work in that sector. Instead, she is guided towards a nursing job. Having no alternative option and because employment is guaranteed, she goes for it. Anita is adapting herself to the ever changing needs of the labour market. She tries to acquire the necessary competencies to meet these needs and to come to terms with the social expectations.
Soon she realises that this job is not what she expected. She cannot attune it to her own aspirations, competencies and dreams. The job is getting her down and undermines her self-esteem. Therapy helps her to gain back her self-respect and to cope with the situation. By attending evening courses in pottery and furniture making, she tries to develop the forgotten creative aspects of her self. Anita pays attention to her own growth. This means that she aims to develop herself as an authentic, free and responsible person unfolding her potential capacities whilst also taking care of her own well-being in order to personally cope with the society-in-transformation.
Anita also does all sorts of courses and evening classes and in a certain way, develops a proper life style. In this strategy of distinction the development of an alternative, individual life style in view of finding a personalised way out of societal demands which are experienced as oppressive, is at stake.
Actually however, Anita wants to be a furniture maker and dreams of starting her own little business. But at the moment, taking into account the limitations of the context in which she has to operate, this is not a realistic option. For the moment, she decides to become a cab driver instead, for she wants to prove that she is able to do a man's job. Meanwhile she dreams on. Driving her taxi, Anita is resisting the dominant practices on the labour market. She directs critical reflection and action towards influencing and maybe transforming the demands of society.

The life story as a process of biographical work and biographical learning

During the process of analysing the interviews, I little by little came to realise that actually part of the learning processes I was curious about, was taking place before my eyes, in the interview setting, whilst the story was being told. I came to understand that next to a story 'on' the learning, there is the learning 'in' and 'through' the story. It was not only me who was trying to understand the stories once being told and to make sense of them in terms of learning. When telling their life story, part of the learning process of the women was being accomplished. Some of the women became aware of the differences between the strategies they used, others saw some work experiences in a different light, they could make explicit what they learned out of every experience... It can be stated that by narrating their life, the women presented themselves as agents: they took their life in their own hands by giving meaning to their past life experiences and by exploring and developing possible future action perspectives. "I view the life story as a form of future-oriented retrospection. I argue that the narrator of a life story is engaged in self-evaluation and aims above all to appear as a socially competent person. In this process, the personal past is used to narrate forth the competence of the narrator protagonist" (Komulainen, 1999, p. 124).

At the end of her story Anita spontaneously looks back at the critical moments in her work career. She put into words what she has learned and how the meaning of work for her has shifted over time. It is this learning that made her decide to become a cab driver and really look for meaningful work in a wilful way.
"When I was fired in the government service, that was a very important moment. I realised that I was just a number, that I didn't really matter. I was fired because there came another boss. It had nothing to do with me as a person. I learned that it is not because I do my job well, that I can keep it.
And then the sewing in the factory. Then I really saw that work is not necessary for me. It does not mean anything for me. I lost my interest in work, certainly in that way.
Being a family and elderly helper, I realised that work is very akin to your person and your feelings. And that it was no place for me. Maybe I could have kept up for the rest of my life, if I could have dis/anced myself from the work. But because it does concern me, I stopped with it. Work should be something in which you feel yourself at ease, in which you can do the things you find meaningful. That is very important. I didn't use to think that way. I thought that work would be OK when it is nearby, with good working hours and a good salary.

Sometimes I think that when my husband would earn enough, I would not go working. But when there is no money to do some hobby's, then you cannot spend your time usefully. I don't want to feel lost at home and do nothing. That's why I want to work. I really would like to make my work of my hobby. I think that as a furniture maker I would no longer have the feeling that I could be missed. I would feel needed, because of my ideas that can lead to something creative together with those of others."

This interview fragment shows that Anita makes her learning process explicit in her story. Although it is impossible to say whether these insights just occurred to her at the interview, telling her story probably contributed to it, consciously or implicitly. The interviews show that many women think about their life experiences in terms of learning. They experience life as a 'school'. When they look back at their life by telling their life story, they consider their life as one learning process.
Anita for example says: *"Now, it's just like I am more conscious about it. You know, when you have experienced all sorts of things, you just think, you know…"*
Annelies states: *"It is by stumbling and having trouble and always trying again that you start to realise: this is not what I want for profession. Certainly not. And these are possibilities and ways to look for alternatives and solutions."*
Moniek concludes her story: *"For me actually, the biggest school has been life itself. What I have gone through. That I learned what is important and what is not. And that I didn't waste energy on futilities. I think that at every moment life is perfect. Whatever happens, it is perfect. Even bad things are perfect because you'll learn something out of it. If not, it would not happen."*

Despite the fact that some women tell me they have learned out of life, the relation between narrating a life story and learning is not clear-cut, nor for all women alike. At the end of the interviews I expressly asked the women how they had experienced it. For some the interviews were a welcome occasion to talk about their work. It is not obvious whether they also actually (consciously) learned from it, nor whether the interview induced a learning process. But they appreciated the interviews, and considered them as 'useful' (because they learned something?). Other women indicated that they had learned during the interviews. One of them even stated hat she had consented to take part in the research with a view to learning from it. The feedback of my research subjects confronted me with the fact that my research on the biographical learning processes of women itself probably has contributed in one way or another to these same learning processes.
For Julia for example narrating her life story gives her an opportunity to reflect upon her recent change of work and to make up the balance. She is making a conversation with herself, discussing several possibilities, ambitions and realities. *"This way you make a stop at it. I find this interesting. Otherwise it won't happen, I think. And now I really can dwell on it. We went back to everything that happened and I find that very positive for myself. Absolutely, I think it is very valuable. I think we do this too little, so I certainly took the opportunity when you contacted me."*

The women did not only hint at their learning whilst narrating at the end of the interview as an aswer to my question. Also in the middle of their story they often made reflections on their learning going on.
Magda came to a new insight concerning her motivation to open her own shop. *"Maybe that is something, I don't know… It just occurs to me now, like, hey, I can also achieve something and nobody did that before me."* After the interview she said: *"Actually, you learn a great deal of yourself, no? What you… but you are not always attentive to it…"*
Denise was really challenged by the interview. She even wrote things down to avoid to forget them. *"It is the first time that I… That I realise, because of your questions, that my friends, that all three of them are involved with people, all three in more or less the same way."* She also reformulated specific questions, making her own sense of them. *"Thus the question is: if you had another upbringing? Wait, I'll write that down. Actually, that is how I would like to be, no?"*

The stories of the women not only show that during their life they learned to manage ambivalences in work, making use of different biographical strategies. Their life stories testify to their self in development. At the same time however, their stories are constitutive for this self. In the story the self reveals itself. Through the story the self is created. "How one tells one's life histories, how one selects and frames the stories, both reveals and creates the self" (Rossiter, 1999, p. 62). Through telling the stories the women perform biographical work. "The term 'biographical work' refers to the various ways in which people interpret the changes in their lives and try to create coherence across these changes" (Komulainen, 1999, p. 135). They come to see their past in a different light and are invited to interpret it in another way (Verhesschen, 2001).

I tried to understand these narrative learning processes of the women by elaborating upon theories on biographical learning (Alheit, 1992, 1995; Dausien, 1996, Dominicé, 2000; Finger, 1988; West, 2000). In my interpretative framework biographical learning refers to a specific process of biographical work in which – retrospectively – alternative (mixes of) biographical strategies are described and investigated to create new meaningful connections and to explore unlived lives. Life stories do not just testify to the strategies being used along the way. They are themselves infinite processes of giving meaning to and of reconstructing experiences, events and choices. The meaning and value of an experience can only become clear by looking back on it in the life story. At the same time the result of this recollection is not only a one to one reflection of these experiences, but an active and open reconstruction. At every moment the past can get another meaning in the present and form the basis for other biographical strategies that can offer new action perspectives for the future. Biographical reflexivity and biographical agency are the driving forces of this learning process[7].

Life stories as revelation and transformation

At first I considered the life stories of the women as data to be gathered in order to find an answer to my research question. I was not interested in their biographies or life histories as such, but was curious to what their stories could teach me about a specific societal issue, namely learning processes concerning transitions in work. I only paid attention to the stories as a product testifying of a learning process, but not as a process in itself. Only later I began to realise that this process character of the story is crucial for the learning. It is the act of telling the life story which plays a crucial role in the biographical learning process. The story is constitutive of the learning and has next to a revealing force, also a transformative power. The story is the location of the learning, it is the bearer of the learning. It was not my intention to provoke a learning process for the women I interviewed during the research. But by asking them to tell me their life story I inevitably possibly induced a learning process.

The research story and the learning process of the researcher

As a researcher I often told stories about my research, to myself and to others, by thinking, talking and writing about it. It did not only help me to see things clearer because I was forced to make them explicit, but also gave me the opportunity to learn from the feedback of other listeners and readers and to reconstruct my understanding. One could say that as a researcher I went through a learning process during the research for which the telling of the story of the research on various occasions was a crucial thing: discussions with colleagues, meetings with supervisor, presentations at conferences, writing articles and the dissertation. By revealing and transforming insights the research story was crucial for the research process and research result. Accordingly, I experienced my research activities as an ongoing process which I could best make sense of in terms of a narrative. My learning process in the research is many-sided. Methodologically I learned about the relation between learning, narrating and research and about

[7] In Stroobants & Wildemeersch (2000) these dimensions of biographical learning are being discussed.

my position as a researcher in a narrative biographical research. Theoretically I learned a (narrative) way to construct a grounded framework and to account for it as scientific knowledge.

Biographical research: descriptive or interpretative?

The starting point of my learning process lies in the contact with the research subjects and the struggle with the analysis of the interview material. The driving force was the interaction between data and theory and discussions with nearby and more distant research colleagues. I experienced a lot of difficulties in making sense of my empirical data. This went together with confusion, ambivalences and feelings of uncertainty. Little by little I became aware that the methodological approach I was following did not really match the theoretical assumptions I believed in.

I first got acquainted with and inspired by a specific biographical research method during a Summer school at the beginning of my PhD. Back home I tried to organise my research activities following the directives of the IBL (Institüt für angewandte Biographie- und Lebensweltforschung (Alheit, 1997)). In my own research context however - the research centre for adult and continuing education of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven - things turned out quite different and were difficult to realise. Whereas the IBL tradition can be considered as descriptive, our approach is very 'pedagogical'. This means that next to trying to understand the reality we are interested in, we also want to improve it. The aim of the research is to provide outcomes which are intervention oriented. A second distinction can be made. Whereas in the IBL approach the researcher takes an objective outsider stance, merely gathering and reconstructing data, the position of the researcher is not so clear in our centre. Having experience in action research the subjective and value loaded interventionist role of the researcher seems obvious. This does not mean however that apart from the intentional interventions of the researcher the position and impact of the researcher on the process is taken into account as a matter of fact. Against the background of a struggle between empirical-analytical and interpretative science, the influence of the researcher (consciously or as a side-effect) is not always made explicit but sometimes kept hidden for the sake of objectivity. Fortunately, the past few years the tradition of interpretative research grows stronger, taking seriously the fundamentally social meaning giving processes of research subjects and researchers alike. (Smeyers, 1999).

I thus wanted to do biographical research and I knew why, but didn't know how. I looked for support in the IBL method, although it didn't really harmonise with our research tradition nor with my growing experiences with being a researcher. This theme of balancing between looking for holdfast in IBL concerning biographical research and distancing from it because some of the presuppositions didn't make sense to me, between describing and intervening, between being scientifically objective and subjectively involved, runs as a continuous thread through my research.

The life story: to be listened to or to be interactively composed?

The presupposition underlying the IBL method can be summarised briefly as follows (Alheit, 1995; Jakob, 1997). Throughout their life people develop certain biographical structures or biographical logics with which specific experiences are connected to one another. This ordering of experiences happens via a narrative structure. In people's narratives – or in the narrative recollection of their actions – the directing structure for these actions is reconstructed. In a narrative interview this biographical structure can be discovered, on condition that the narrator is free to determine the content, rhythm and structure of the story he or she wants to tell. This self-steering by the narrator during the interview is necessary to enable the representation of the biographical structure by the researcher whilst analysing the data. In the IBL method the interviewer stimulates the interviewee to tell the life story without intervening or interrupting the flow of the story. It is as if the story of the narrator is in one way or another present, detached from the narrator, the listener and their interaction, and just awaits the right moment to be told. The interview setting can be seen as such an opportunity. The fact that the story is an instantaneous composition asked

for by the interviewer that takes shape in the presence of and in interaction with the interviewer is overlooked.

In my PhD I looked for an intermediate course between the biographical method of BHL and other approaches that account more of the construction process of the narrative in the presence of the researcher (see for example Dominicé, 2000; Järvinen, 2000; Larson, 1997; West, 2000). With each woman I had two interviews. The first was biographical and I tried to follow the guidelines not to steer nor interrupt. The second was thematically structured and more dialogical. Nevertheless, it was only later, when analysing the interviews, that I really reflected upon the consequences of my approach with respect to my developing insights in biographical learning. One article in particular helped me to frame my experiences and difficulties as an interviewer. It is about a researcher describing herself occasionally being a research subject in narrative research. Her intention of telling her life story did not fit the assumptions of the researcher asking for her story. "Researchers assume that if they do not interrupt their respondents, then their subject's stories will be told. Yet, we fail to recognise how researchers affect their respondents' stories and the meanings inscribed in those stories by being human and being present. Narrative involves not only a sequence of stories and events, but also a storyteller and an audience" (Larson, 1997, p. 459).

In view of the insights concerning the learning processes of the research subjects during the interview I described above, some questions arise. Is the life story something to be transferred from the interviewee to the interviewer or a collaborative construction? Is the researcher a listener or a co-composer? Is the interview setting a place for data collection or for dialogue and mutual learning? These questions obtain very different answers, depending on the different perspectives on biographical research which I got to know only gradually during my research. A distinction can be made between biographical research as a descriptive reconstructive science or as an intervening science (Ricker, 1999), between the use of life histories as research data or as content of learning and teaching processes (Kade & Nittel, 1997; Dominicé, 2000).

Auto biographical research

During my research I struggled with the ambivalences concerning the narratives of the women and my interviewer behaviour and reflected upon the consequences for my position as a researcher in the research process. On the spot as an interviewer, and especially during the biographical interview, I was rather distant and didn't engage myself fully in the interaction with my research subjects, meaning that I didn't actively co-compose the story of the women. I thought of their narrative as 'their' story and I just helped them to tell it. In contrast, as a researcher analysing and interpreting my data and reflecting upon the research process, my voice and my contribution came more to the fore. I tried to make up for my absence during the interviews by critically reflecting on my position as a researcher on the one hand and by making my share in the research result and research process very explicit on the other hand. In this sense my research can be called auto biographical, because it questions the myth of the distanced, objective and neutral researcher (West, 2000). In my research report the voice and the role of the researcher in the process and product of the research is very obviously present.

Product of the research: narrative analysis and narrative knowledge

In my dissertation I describe in detail how my grounded interpretation, the theoretical result of my research, developed and grew, while alternately telling the life story of one particular woman and the story of my analysis process, both of which are understood as a learning process. The process of analysing and interpreting the data was characterised by the principle of abduction. This means that there was a permanent iterative and constitutive interaction between my research question, my sensitising concepts, my empirical data, theoretical insights, my growing interpretations… Through this interplay I developed an understanding of the learning processes of the women. Also here the telling of my preliminary story was crucial and constitutive to reach a deeper level of understanding. It challenged me to make my thoughts clear not only for myself but for others as well, which was very illuminating to

reformulate my findings. "For me the research is much more of a hermeneutic process, with its meaning being rewritten many times along the way, as the whole is continuously being reconceptualised in the light of new learning" (Hanrahan, Cooper & Burroughs-Lange, 1999, p.404).

The process of analysing the data can be seen as a narrative analysis. For I was not so much interested in facts and givens, but in meanings and interpretations. I did not want to formulate general judgements on the learning of the women, but aimed to develop an interpretative framework to understand the learning processes of the women in their dynamic particularity and specificity. This way of looking at knowledge can be characterised as narrative. "Narrative knowing ... is concerned more with human intention and meaning than with discrete facts or events, more with coherence than with logic, and more with understanding than with predictability and control" (Rossiter, 1999, p. 60).
Not only the analysis process of my research can be considered a narrative, the theoretical result of the research as well[5]. The doctoral dissertation I wrote expresses the process of my interpretation of the studied learning processes and the way the interpretative framework came about. "Narrative analysis relates events and actions to one another by configuring them as contributors to the advancement of a plot. The story constituted by narrative integration allows for the incorporation of notions of human purpose and choice as well as chance, happenings, dispositions, and environmental presses. The results of a narrative analysis is an explanation that is retrospective, having linked past events together to account for how a final outcome might have come about" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 16). Next to that, I believe that the framework I developed leaves room for other possible interpretations. At the same time it offers starting points to understand similar social phenomena, situations and processes in their full complexity and to tell a story about them.

Research process, research biography

My research does not unfold itself as predictable, linear and controllable, nor did I experience it that way. It rather is a capricious surprising and often hard process, that changed and had to be redirected all the time. Because of this nature of my research, it makes sense to consider the research process as a narrative. "Since the overall process is a process of change over time, the research as a whole is most easily conceived of as the development of a narrative, a jointly developed narrative, with many participants, but told by one narrator who takes responsibility for, and at the same time critiques, the view of intersubjective reality presented, at each stage and as a whole" (Hanrahan, Cooper & Burroughs-lange, 1999, p. 405). I experienced that the best way for me to write about the process and the results of my research activities was, by telling how all of it came about, evolved and made sense to me in the end. For me, telling the narrative of my research became also necessary from a methodological point of view. I contend that this telling of the research biography from the point of view of the researcher is necessary to understand the results of my research and to judge the quality of the research (Larsson, 1998; Wardekker, 1999).
Research is not about following a recipe, it asks constant reflection and reworking of previous insights and strategies to go along. Especially when the research deals with the particularity of the meaning making and learning of individuals, the research is very complex that cannot be foreseen. Therefore it is necessary to tell the several stories of the research, to describe the preparation, execution and evaluation of the research process, to present the iterative interpretative way of making sense of the data, not withholding personal remarks, doubts, questions and indistinctnesses of the researcher. And all this in order to be able to situate the researcher in relation to the research subjects and the stages and results of the research, to make the different contributing factors of theory development transparent, and in the end to give the reader the opportunity to judge the quality of the research report, the research results and the researcher. "Despite the increase in autobiographical, reflective accounts of research, one of the most

[5] Against the background of societal evolutions, a postmodern approach to research is being adopted (Packwood & Sikes, 1996; Usher, 1997) in which the relation between research and narrative is explored.

pervasive implicit metaphors that frames the final text is still that of research as a recipe. This is not only an implicit metaphor, it is also an implicit myth. The metaphor is that the process of research is to follow a recipe, and the myth is that this is the truth. These are illusions that researchers perpetuate. We perpetuate them by the way we present our final research texts and by the way we carefully delete the voice of the researcher, our own voice from the text" (Packwood & Sikes, 1996, p. 336).

Biographical research, collaborative, autobiographical, narrative

Radically living up to the presuppositions of narrative biographical research implies and requires a learning process of the researcher. Acknowledging the revealing and transforming character of the life stories of the research subjects and the active role of the researcher as inductor and listener of the stories, makes the research more participatory or collaborative (Wardekker, 1999) and auto/biographical (West, 2000). The researcher has to engage himself or herself in an open process, learning to make sense of the data, taking into account the self interpretation of the research subjects and his or her own understanding of it. The differences between the research subjects and the researcher grow smaller or become different. It is not so much a relationship between expert and layman, nor between distant observer and 'experience expert', but between two learners, naturally in a different context and for a different purpose. As a consequence a certain way of writing or reporting on the research is necessary. It does not suffice to present the final outcome of the research. Also the process which the researcher had to go trough to reach that outcome has to be accounted for, theoretically as well as methodologically. My doctoral dissertation is based upon two 'pillars': the story of the women involved and my narrative interpretation of them. Parallel I make the research process transparent and followable. In this way I try to do justice to the learning of the research subjects and of the researcher and to the narratives that are constitutive for these processes.

Conclusion

In narrative biographical research the people involved as well as the researcher are protagonist, narrator and auditor of their own story, meaning that their story reveals as well as transforms the meanings and experiences it is telling. Just like the life stories of the women, the research story of the researcher again and again passes the same themes and issues, but always at another level of integration and complexity (Bloom, 1996). In this way the stories can constitute learning processes.
Next to this parallel between the story and the learning of the research subjects and the researcher, there are also some differences. The aim of a researcher is more than telling what happened in the research. The research is not only experienced as a learning process, it also has to be accounted for as a scientific process. The ambition is to develop scientific knowledge, to give a theoretical surplus to the understanding of a certain phenomenon. In this way, the story of the researcher, in contrast with that of the research subject, must be justified and is open to argued critique within the scientific community.

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